

# CHAPTER 6

## THE INNER DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRACTITIONER

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### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Chinese medicine it has been understood that the individuality of the practitioner has an enormous effect on the efficacy of acupuncture treatment. With its emphasis on treating at the subtlest levels of the person's qi, it is natural that many practitioners of Five Element Constitutional Acupuncture place a great deal of importance on their internal state.

Wu was the ancient character for a healer or physician. This character depicts a female shaman below a quiver with an arrow and a spear (Weiger, 1965, lesson 82a).

In the Shang dynasty, the era preceding the time of the Nei Jing, medicine was largely practised by shamans who lived in the community. It was accepted that certain people had the gift to be a shaman or a physician and that this talent was not available to everyone. The Nei Jing, however, ushered in an era where diagnosis was based on more systematic criteria such as yin/yang and the Five Elements. The gifts and skill of the person carrying out the diagnosis and treatment were still considered to be of crucial importance, however. The significance of this expertise is emphasised in the following quotation:

If someone says that an illness that has persisted for a long time cannot be removed his statement is wrong. When someone who is an expert in utilising the needles removes such an illness, it is as if he has pulled out a thorn, as if he has cleansed what is soiled, as if he untied what is knotted, and as if he opened what is blocked. Even though an illness has persisted for a long time, it can likewise be brought to an end. Those who state that such illnesses cannot be cured have not yet acquired the respective skills. (Ling Shu, Chapter 1)

Sheng ren is the phrase used in the Nei Jing to describe the most accomplished physicians. Weiger translates it a 'sage' or 'wise man' who 'listened to and understood the advice given by the sage and thus becomes wise' (Weiger, 1965, p. 211). Richard Wilhelm says that a sheng ren 'through his power awakens and develops people's higher nature' (Wilhelm, 1951, p. 3).

Inevitably there are differences in how each individual practitioner's qualities are perceived (see Hsu, 1999, pp. 94–104). In the competitive world of Chinese medicine in China today, doctors who have a busy practice and a good reputation are said to have jingyan. Although usually translated as 'experience' the word means much more than that. An experienced but unpopular doctor does not have jingyan. 'Virtuosity' (linghuo), which can be found in excellent physicians of any system, is part of what is conveyed by jingyan. Acquiring jingyan is a realistic goal for practitioners and a necessary one if they aspire to attain at least some of the attributes of a sheng ren.

Whether a man goes on living in health, or whether a disease arises; whether it is in the human power to control it, and whether the patient can be cured; whether one is only at the beginning of the study of acupuncture (and moxibustion), or whether one has come to the fullness of it – all depends (on an understanding of the functions of) the twelve-tract network system of yang and yin channels. To the slap-dash practitioner or the tyro [a beginner, a novice] it all seems very easy; only the great physician knows how difficult it really is.

(Ling Shu, Chapter 11; Lu and Needham, 1980, p. 28)

## WHY IS INNER DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT?

Practitioners cultivate their virtuosity (linghuo) because it enhances their ability to make accurate diagnoses and give effective treatments.

### Diagnosis

#### Signs versus symptoms

When carrying out a diagnosis, a practitioner needs to understand the patient's signs and symptoms. Diagnosis based on signs is far more difficult to learn than one based on symptoms. A diagnosis based on symptoms can be made from a transcript of a patient's case history, but it will not help the practitioner to understand subtler aspects of the patient. Diagnosis of the CF is made from observable signs and can only be made by using a combination of sensory acuity and intuition (zhiguan). This allows practitioners to perceive patients' emotional balance and temperament.

This was described by Chuang Tzu as follows:

The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of the understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear, or to the mind. Hence it demands the emptiness of all the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind.

(translation from Merton, 1970, Chapter 4)

The emphasis on diagnosing the relative imbalance of patients' emotions requires practitioners to relate to the emotional life of the patient. Practitioners must be able to induce patients to reveal aspects of their inner selves in order to assess the balance of the key five emotions. To do this practitioners must make excellent rapport with their patients.

If a man is brusque in his movements, others will not co-operate. If he is agitated in his words, they awaken no echo in others. If he asks for something without having first established relations, it will not be given to him.

(Confucius; Analects)

#### The practitioner's internal state

Practitioners also need to be aware of their own emotions. Because of their own constitutional imbalances and emotional predispositions, practitioners may find it more difficult to experience some emotions than others. This is especially the case if they have emotions that are intense. Some practitioners, for example, deny their own grief or sadness. They therefore do not feel comfortable exploring these areas in someone else. This can result in them having little idea of what really troubles the person. Some practitioners can find it hard to be very sympathetic or difficult to fully recognise the extent of fear in another person. If these limitations are overcome the practitioner's diagnostic abilities can reach their full potential.

#### Cultivating awareness

When using this style of acupuncture it is necessary to cultivate an attitude of highly focused awareness in order to make a diagnosis. The practice of Five Element Constitutional Acupuncture becomes sterile and inadequate unless practitioners are constantly vigilant. Practitioners need to listen to the nuances in the voice, observe the facial colour, attempt to discern an odour and perceive emotions arising in the patient. It is this vigilance and awareness that enables the practitioner to make diagnosis a stimulating ongoing process.

If the patient has been separated from his relatives for long and has become worried as a result, then the emotions of worry, fear, joy and anger may undergo irregular changes which could cause an empty deficiency of the five viscera with the blood and qi departing from their usual guarding positions. A physician cannot be regarded as a good one unless he can detect such things in his diagnosis.

(Su Wen, Chapter 76; Lu, 1972, Chapter 76)

Achieving and maintaining this level of awareness is dependent upon the internal condition of the practitioner.

#### Presence

Another important aspect of diagnosis is the quality of attention the practitioner gives to patients. When practitioners are completely present for their patients they can hear and accept what patients tell them without feeling a need to make their patients change. This special quality enables patients to feel accepted and acknowledged so that they can more easily accept themselves. Over time this allows patients to build trust in the practitioner so that they can open up and reveal parts of themselves they have previously kept hidden. By revealing these parts the practitioner understands and connects to deeper aspects of the patient's mind and spirit. (For more on making rapport, see Chapter 24, this volume.)

To develop presence the practitioner needs to cultivate a state of focused awareness, coupled with a quality of self-acceptance. Practitioners who strive to accept themselves are likely to also accept whatever arises from their patients. The quality of attention given to the patient by the practitioner helps to develop a deep level of rapport and trust which is of prime importance, not only for diagnosis but also for treatment.

## Treatment

In the practice of medicine, rapport is often taken to mean that the practitioner and patient are getting along well and a therapeutic relationship has been established. Practitioners of Five Element Constitutional Acupuncture know that rapport needs to be significantly more than this. The contact between the practitioner and patient potentiates the treatment itself. This in turn evokes change in the patient's mind and spirit. The degree to which the qi of the practitioner harmonises with that of the patient influences the efficacy of each act of needling.

If two are similar, they will coalesce. If notes correspond they will resonate.

(Chun Qiu Fa Lu, approx. -200; quoted in Needham, 1956, p. 281)

Ideally at the moment of needling, the patient feels relaxed and secure with the practitioner. This enables her or him to be receptive to the change that is being initiated by needling the acupuncture point.

In the mind of the physician there should be no desires, only a receptive and accepting attitude, then the mind can become shen. The mind of the physician and the mind of the patient should be level, in harmony following the movements of the needle.

(Da Cheng; Zhen, 1996)

It is the inner development of practitioners that enables them to achieve the levels of awareness and depth of rapport needed in the treatment room.

## MAXIMISING RAPPORT AND INCREASING THE EFFICACY OF TREATMENT

Practitioners accumulate jingyan through their own experience of life. It is not possible for a physician to lead an 'unexamined' life with no regard for morality or self-development and expect to attain significant amounts of jingyan. Sun Si-miao summed it up like this: 'The superior physician strives for a pure spirit and looks inward.'

### Wu wei – non-action

Daoism has a concept of wu wei which has often been mistakenly translated as 'non-action'. What the Han dynasty Daoists meant by wu wei, however, was ensuring that all action was in accord with the nature of the particular time. One of the key emphases of the I Ching is to help a person gain an understanding of the particular time or situation present. Wu wei is action that is driven by the needs of the situation rather than by the person's needs or desires. For the Han dynasty Daoists living in harmony with nature was essential to living and acting in harmony with the needs of the time and situation. As it says in the Huainanzi: 'The sages in all their methods of action follow the nature of things' (Morgan, 1877).

The transition of the seasons, and the lessons learnt from them about humanity and the dao of Heaven and Earth are timeless.

### Living in harmony with nature

The Nei Jing has many exhortations for people to live according to the principles that underpin the system of medicine.

In ancient times, people lived simply. They hunted, fished and were with nature all day. When the weather cooled, they became active to fend off the cold. When the weather heated up in summer, they retreated to cool places. Internally their emotions were calm and peaceful and they were without excessive desires. Externally they did not have the stress of today. They lived without greed or desire, close to nature. They maintained inner peace and concentration of spirit ... This prevented the pathogens from invading.

(Ni, 1995, Chapter 13)

Spending time outside being in direct contact with Heaven and Earth and observing the different energetic qualities of the seasons and the times of day, has been a source of inspiration for many practitioners. As well as helping them to maintain good health, it also helps them to create and sustain concentration and purpose. This is necessary in order to give high-quality acupuncture treatments as well as deepening their understanding of the Five Elements and yin/yang.

### Stilling the mind and spirit

The Nei Jing makes it clear that one of the essential attributes of a sheng ren (sage) is the ability of practitioners to concentrate and still the mind and spirit. If practitioners are not able to put aside the preoccupations and suffering of their own life when they enter the treatment room then it is not possible for them to engage fully with the patient.

Su Wen makes the point that 'the jingshen of the sheng ren would not be dispersed' (Larre and Rochat de la Vallée, 1995, p. 34). This is not possible if practitioners do not actively seek to find a way to harmonise the turmoil of their emotional life and to still the ramblings of the mind.

The reason that a physician fails to make a complete diagnosis is due to absence of mental concentration and irregular state of his will and sentiments which causes inconsistency between the internal and external and brings about the state of doubt.

(Su Wen, Chapter 78; Lu, 1972, p. 634)

Qi development practises such as qi gong, and tai ji, as well as meditation, are all possible paths towards a more settled mind and spirit. Historically these have been used as self-development tools by practitioners from all areas of Chinese medicine. They are, however, especially beneficial to acupuncturists because they are working directly with a patient's qi.

Practising these arts enables acupuncturists to have greater awareness of their internal state while treating. Regular practice enables practitioners to have greater control over their qi and to relax and centre themselves before commencing treatment. Qi practices also enable the practitioner to develop greater sensitivity to their patient's qi and to focus their own qi on the patient while carrying out treatment.

## Focusing attention

Because Five Element Constitutional Acupuncture has an overriding focus on diagnosis by signs, the development of sensory acuity and intuition is also part of the path towards a more focused mind and spirit. It is necessary to 'transcend the dulling of the senses', in order to develop the traditional diagnostic skills of seeing, hearing, smelling and touching to the level required for this style of acupuncture.

Just as artists or musicians hone their sensitivity in order to be able to express their nature more fully, the cultivation of these delicate and sublime parts of our humanity can lead to a more settled and refined spirit in the practitioner. Good pulse diagnosis requires that the mind is stilled. This is itself akin to meditation practices that require people to focus their attention on the subtle sensations that are felt in particular parts of the body, for example the Burmese Buddhist practice of Vipassana meditation. Qigong practitioners, who tend to be more concerned with their inner development than most acupuncturists, generally believe that it is the work they do in meditation and qigong exercises that is essential in order to replenish their own reserves of yuan qi (see Hsu, 1999, p. 74).

The Japanese acupuncturist Yanagiya was clear about what he considered the essential internal condition necessary for pulse diagnosis: 'Focus your attention to your fingertips. Do not speak, do not look, do not listen, do not smell and do not think. This is the key principle of pulse diagnosis' (Matsumoto and Birch, 1988).

## Stillness while needling

A harmonious internal state is essential if the practitioner is going to receive the essential diagnostic information from the patient. Guo Yu, writing in the first century, was very clear that a practitioner needed to be both impeccable and experienced in order to practise acupuncture at the level required.

Even the slightest hairline deviation when inserting an acupuncture needle is an inexcusable professional blunder. The skilful practice of acupuncture depends upon perfect coordination of the shen and hands. It can be learned, but not described in words.

(Chuang, 1991, p. 27)

Practitioners must still their minds and be prepared to leave the concerns of their life outside the treatment room door.

With nothing to be seen – your hands as gripping a tiger,  
No needs felt within – your attention on a noble fellow.

(Bertschinger, 1991, p. 43)

The physician strives to practice acupuncture with 'no needs felt within', in keeping with the concept of wu wei. The closer practitioners come to the ideal state the more able they are to concentrate 'attention on a noble fellow'.

## Intention

The Chinese word yi can be translated in several different ways depending on the context. In a Han dynasty text it refers to 'that which the physician desires and consciously conceives of, that which he wills, but also that which comes about through a kind of focusing of consciousness' (see Scheid and Bensky, 1998). This view of the importance of the internal state of the practitioner is well summed by the acupuncturist Guo Yu, who was famed for his needling skills.

Now, when it comes to treating nobles, they look down on me from the heights of their distinguished places, and I am filled with anxiety that I might not please them. Though the acupuncture needles demand precise measure, with them I am often in error. I am burdened with a heart full of trepidation, compounded by a will reduced in strength. Thus intention (yi) is not fully there. Consider what influence this has on treating the disorder. This is the reason I cannot bring about a cure.

(Zhou, 1983)

Most practitioners of Five Element Constitutional Acupuncture place a high value on the practitioner's intention and are in agreement with Sun Si-miao when he wrote, 'Medicine is intention (yi). Those who are proficient at using intention are good doctors' (quoted in Scheid and Bensky, 1998).

There is a huge difference between being treated by a practitioner who is 'proficient at using intention' and one who is not. It is similar to the effect that a beautiful piano sonata has on the spirit when it is played by a sensitive and accomplished musician compared to the same piece of music used as a ringing tone on a mobile phone. In one instance the pianist has gathered his yi and imbued the music with his own spirit. In the other, the notes may be the same but the effect on a person's spirit is similar to being needled by a robot.

Su Wen hints at the kind of internal state and sensitivity necessary in the practitioner at the moment of needling: 'The physician must be like a crossbowman pressing his trigger at the exact time, not an instant too soon, not an instant too late – as if grasping a tiger – and the mind oblivious of all other things'.<sup>1</sup>

## Interacting with the patient

In the treatment room the crucial factors are the rapport gained with the patient and the state of the practitioner's mind and spirit at the moment of needling. As well as being present with their patients, practitioners must also find ways to interact that satisfies patients' needs.

Five Element diagnosis may also be helpful. For example, some patients who are Fire CFs will need to feel warmth from the practitioner in order to feel truly relaxed and receptive at the moment of needling. A person who is a Wood CF may need to feel that the practitioner is assertive and in command of the situation. Any diffidence or indecision in the practitioner may set up a degree of anxiety and the required level of rapport is not achieved. Tenderness and gentleness are other qualities that enable patients to feel sufficiently safe and cared for so that they can be fully receptive to the treatment. In order to attain sufficient rapport it is necessary for practitioners to allow their spirit to radiate in such a way as touches the patient's spirit.

Understanding the patient's Five Element diagnosis may help the practitioner to understand what kind of relationship is best achieved with the patient. Physicians with excellent jingyan, whatever their system of medicine, have always been able to achieve the appropriate level of rapport. What is essential is that practitioners are prepared to draw on all of their inner resources and are happy to try many different approaches in order to induce the optimum level of relaxation and trust in the patient.

## Compassion

As well as stilling the mind and spirit and becoming 'proficient at using intention', another essential attribute is the cultivation of the Heart. Many of China's most respected practitioners came from the ranks of the Confucian 'gentlemen' (ruyi). One of the key qualities they traditionally cultivated was ren, which translates as 'a sensitive concern for others' (Elvin, M., in Carrithers, 1985, pp. 156–189) or 'humaneness' (Allan, 1997). The eminent Chinese practitioner Dr John Shen said that a practitioner must have a 'good heart' (lecture organised by the Journal of Chinese Medicine given in London in 1978). The physician's acceptance and care for the patient is an integral part of the healing process.

How can a practitioner cultivate ren? Awareness of its importance and creating a goal to develop it is obviously a start. In order to fully identify with the pain and suffering of another, however, practitioners benefit from having experienced and been aware of suffering themselves. As an Arabic proverb says, 'No man is a good physician who has never been sick'. To quote another saying: 'True kindness presupposes the faculty of imagining as one's own the suffering and joy of others' (André Gide).

For practitioners who are fortunate enough not to live in chronic physical pain it is a valuable experience to endure physical pain on occasions, as it gives some insight into what many patients suffer. This is also true at the level of the mind and spirit. It is largely through our personal experience of unhappiness and suffering that we develop our spirit and our compassion. Buddhism, China's third most important religion, teaches that the cause of suffering in people's lives is desire. Inability to satisfy their desires leads people to experience many painful internal states. People who deny their own suffering never experience their full humanity.

The combination of the constitutional imbalance and its effect on the other Elements makes it inevitable that certain emotions are more difficult to fully experience than others. The concept of the 'wounded healer' has become widely accepted in recent years. This idea assumes that it is through the experience of psychological wounds that physicians deepen their compassion and their understanding of the patient. As stated above, unless practitioners are prepared to explore uncomfortable areas of their own personality, they have little hope of recognising similar aspects in their patients' personalities.

## Empathy

Similarly practitioners have little chance of fully developing their compassion for their patients' suffering if it does not resonate with their own experience of themselves. For example, many people find it relatively easy to empathise with the feelings of heartbreak and sense of loss that people experience when a loving relationship breaks up. It is often hard for practitioners, however, to have the same level of compassion if the patient has feelings such as jealousy, resentment, insecurity and self-loathing. These are regarded as less acceptable emotions and may incur disapproval from practitioners, especially if practitioners have repressed these feelings in themselves. Sun Si-miao wrote:

Whenever a Great Physician treats disease, he has to be mentally calm and his disposition firm. He should not be swayed by his wishes and desires, but should first of all develop a marked attitude of compassion. He should commit himself firmly to the willingness to make every effort to save every living being.

Exasperation with patients for their personal weaknesses, their refusal to accept well-meant advice, excessive need for sympathy or whatever attributes or behaviour are most galling to the practitioner must never stand in the way of establishing a caring therapeutic relationship. As Bob Dylan rightly sang 'And remember when you are out there trying to heal the sick, that you must always first forgive them' (Bob Dylan, in 'Open the door, Homer', Basement Tapes, CBS records, 1975).

Forgiveness is only possible if practitioners maintain an attitude of humility towards the patient and the system of medicine they are attempting to practise. Whatever practitioners think they know about Chinese medicine and acupuncture, they delude themselves if they do not realise that they truly understand only a small amount about yin/yang, the Five Elements and qi.

Alas medicine is so subtle that no one seems able to know about its complete secrets. The way of medicine is so wide that its scope is as immeasurable as the four seas.

## CULTIVATING VIRTUOSITY (LINGHUO)

In each treatment session there is a natural order of activity. The virtuosity of the practitioner affects the quality of the diagnosis and the efficacy of the treatment. Practitioners need to:

- Make excellent rapport with the patient. This is only possible if the practitioner is able to express sufficient compassion (ren). Excellent rapport allows patients to reveal the nature of their emotions and their suffering. Ideally this level of rapport is maintained throughout the entire encounter.
- Employ great sensory acuity and awareness to discern the colour, odour and voice tone.
- Use their own emotions to evoke emotions in the patient.
- Hone their intuition (zhiguan) in order to diagnose the patient's emotional imbalances.
- Still the mind and spirit and use sensory acuity to interpret the pulses.
- Consider the appropriate treatment
- Concentrate intention (yi) and qi to needle the patient.

In order to attain a measure of jingyan or virtuosity (linghuo) in this style of acupuncture these are the main qualities that need to be developed. Each person's path to this development is utterly individual. Traditionally acupuncture practitioners have often used various spiritual practices, including meditation, qi gong and tai qi. Others find communing with nature assists them, whilst others find they are helped by increasing their level of self-understanding.

The goal of the inner development is primarily to increase practitioners' ability to serve the needs of their patients. There is another goal, however. This is to make the experience of working with patients both a source of enjoyment in itself and a vehicle for the practitioner's own development as a human being. There is a huge difference between seeing patients when the practitioner's 'heart is not in it' and when the practitioner is stimulated and excited by the challenge of treating sick people. The latter is both considerably more therapeutic for the patient and a source of vitality and growth for the practitioner.

Some acupuncture practitioners report feeling 'drained' by their experience of seeing patients. It is open to question whether this is to do with 'giving away' their qi, or other factors common to all physicians, such as feeling burdened by feelings of responsibility and self-doubt. The exchange of qi at the moment of needling does not have to be one-way, but mutual. Many experienced practitioners know that they have contacted the patient's qi by the sensation of qi they feel in their own bodies. This can only be possible if qi is transmitted both to and from the practitioner. In order to be an acupuncture practitioner over a long period of time it is essential that practitioners do not allow the mutual exchange of qi and the difficulties of the situation to diminish their own qi.

The state the practitioner hopes to maintain for the vast majority of the time is one of feeling energised by the experience of treating patients. Without this it is difficult to maintain the level of awareness necessary for diagnosis, or the intention required for treatment. As the eminent American physician John Lettsom said, 'Medicine is not a lucrative profession. It is a divine one'. Or, as it says in the Tao te Ching,

The sage does not hoard.  
Having worked for his fellow beings,  
The more he possesses.  
Having donated himself to his fellow beings,  
the more abundant he becomes.

(Chen, 1989)

## SUMMARY

- 1 Practitioners need to develop their virtuosity (linghuo) in order to accumulate jingyan or experience.
- 2 If practitioners wish to become excellent at Five Element Constitutional diagnosis, an important skill to develop is awareness.
- 3 The degree of harmonisation of the qi of the practitioner with the qi of the patient influences the efficacy of each act of needling. This is achieved by attaining a deep level of rapport and trust between practitioner and patient.
- 4 In order to develop as a practitioner it is necessary to still the mind and spirit, focus intention and develop a heartfelt attitude of compassion.
- 5 Honing sensory acuity and intuition concerning people's emotions is a path to greater sensitivity and refinement in the practitioner.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, translations in Merton, 1970, of Chuang Tzu's Chapter 19, 'The woodcarver', Chapter 13, 'Duke Hwan and the wheelwright', or Chapter 3, 'Cutting up an ox', for the kind of qualities needed in a craftsman in the execution of his work; see also Lu and Needham, 1980, p. 91.